

Version 1.0 | Last updated 05 August 2019

Jabotinsky, Vladimir

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Jabotinsky, *Vladimir* Ze'ev ("Altalena", Zhabotinsky, Zhabotinski, Z'abořinski)
Politician, writer, translator, dramatist, journalist, founder of the Jewish Legion and the Revisionist Zionist movement
Born 17 October 1880 in Odessa, Russia
Died 04 August 1940 in Hunter, New York

Russian-Jewish author, playwright, journalist, orator, and political activist; co-founder of the Zion Mule Corps (1915-16) and the Jewish Legion (1917-21, the unofficial name of the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers), composed of Jewish volunteers who joined the British Army to fight against the Ottoman Empire; founder of Revisionist Zionism.

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Early Life and Activities before World War I

Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky (1880-1940) was born in 1880 to an assimilated upper-middle class Jewish family in the port city of Odessa, then part of the [Russian Empire](#). Educated in the city's

finest *gymnasium*, he was fully immersed in Russian language and culture, alongside several other European languages. While studying law in Rome (1898), he began his career as a foreign [correspondent](#) for several [Russian newspapers](#), and picked up his literary pseudonym “Altalena” (“swing” in Italian), with which he signed his articles. Returning to his hometown in 1901, he began publishing his early works as a [poet](#), playwright and translator.

Jabotinsky was drawn to Jewish [nationalism](#) in the early 1900s. He moved closer to [Zionist](#) authors and political activists from 1903 onwards in light of the Kishinev [pogrom](#). In particular, he played a decisive role in the Helsingfors conference of Russian Zionists (1906), which endorsed the idea of “*Gegenwartsarbeit*” (“work in the present”), thereby calling to defend national minorities in the Russian Empire while simultaneously promoting Jewish colonization in [Ottoman Palestine](#). Nevertheless, he failed to be elected for the Second [Duma](#) (Russian legislative election). As early as January 1912 Jabotinsky predicted in an article published in *Odesskiya Novosti* a future “war in the centre of Europe, between two (or more) first-rate civilized powers, armed to teeth with all the grandiose madness of present day’s technical equipment, with the participation of ground, sea, undersea and aerial forces, with an incredible number of human victims.”^[1]

Jabotinsky during World War I

Jabotinsky’s role in the formation of Jewish fighting forces within the [British Army](#) must be viewed in the context of worldwide Zionism at the time. After [Theodor Herzl’s \(1860-1904\)](#) death in 1904, the movement fell into stagnation. When World War I broke out, the Zionist movement announced its [neutrality](#) and moved its headquarters from Hamburg to Copenhagen. Jabotinsky, who found himself without an income, turned back to [journalism](#), and accepted the position of a newspaper correspondent for the liberal *Moscow News*, traveling throughout Europe and reporting on the war and home fronts. In 1915, he traveled to [North Africa](#) and then a [refugee](#) camp in Alexandria, Egypt where Jewish deportees from Ottoman Palestine were sent. Soon thereafter he reached the conclusion that the Ottoman Turks would lose the war and Palestine would fall into the hands of the Entente powers. It was in this context that he came up with the idea of encouraging Jews to volunteer for the British Army and to secure a future Palestine for the Jews.

The Zion Mule Corps

Despite lacking military experience, Jabotinsky grew close to [Joseph Trumpeldor \(1880-1920\)](#), a Russian-Zionist veteran who saw battle during the [Russo-Japanese War \(1904-5\)](#) and was [decorated](#) by the Czar [Nicholas II \(1868-1918\)](#) for his courage under fire. Together, they approached General Sir [John Grenfell Maxwell \(1859-1929\)](#), the General Officer Commanding British Troops in Egypt, who was initially reluctant to endorse their idea and did not anticipate an offensive on Palestine at the time (March 1915). Maxwell agreed, however, to form a Jewish volunteer force that would be sent to battle on some other sector of the Turkish front.

The unit, 650 men strong, was given the official name the Assyrian Jewish Refugee Mule Corps, but was commonly referred to as the Zion Mule Corps (ZMC) – both names horrified Jabotinsky, who believed it could be considered a blemish on Jewish [honor](#), but his colleague Trumpeldor forged on – and was trained hastily to use mules in a supply capacity. Colonel [John Henry Patterson \(1867-1947\)](#), a Protestant Irish and a Zionist sympathizer, was appointed Corps Commander, with Captain Trumpeldor serving as his deputy. Jabotinsky himself did not serve in the ZMC. The unit was composed of Egyptian Jews, alongside [East-European Jews](#), predominately Russian subjects expelled by the Turks from Palestine at the outbreak of the war. Just a few weeks after it was formed, the Corps men, accompanied by about 750 mules, were sent to the [Gallipoli](#) front, joining numerous other [non-British troops](#) that were added to the massive Mediterranean Expeditionary Force – “a veritable Tower of Babel,” as it was dubbed by a contemporary historian.^[2] Eight of its men were killed and fifty-five wounded; three members received honors.

Formation of the Jewish Legion

The ZMC was disbanded in May 1916, less than 14 months after it was created. Jabotinsky, who was the prime motivator for a larger Jewish Legion, began advocating for the idea in late 1915, despite serious reservations from the Anglo-Jewish community and key figures in the Zionist leadership. When 120 of the ZMC's ex-soldiers arrived in London and volunteered for the army, they were all assigned to the same battalion (20th Country of London Battalion), thanks to Patterson's intervention. This provided the nucleolus of the Jewish Legion. Jabotinsky joined them as a private soldier in January 1917 and continued to doggedly pursue the project of forming a Jewish Regiment from within the army. After receiving [Leo Amery's \(1873-1955\)](#) blessing, Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor petition's was reviewed by the War Cabinet which approved it in Spring 1917, several weeks after the Palestine offensive had begun. In late August, the new unit, given official designation of the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, was announced. Commonly referred to as the Jewish Battalion (or the Judean Regiment or the “First to Judah”), the new battalion had a distinctive Jewish character – the uniforms featured a menorah and Jewish star. Jews from Palestine, [Australia](#), the [United States](#) (many of whom were Russian emigres), and other European countries responded to the call for new recruits. Altogether around 5,220 Jewish men joined the unit, forming the 39th and 40th Royal Fusiliers Battalions.

Jabotinsky and Patterson's relationships with the [Egyptian Expeditionary Force](#) higher command were not free of friction, as it clearly contained a number of [antisemitic](#) officers who made the lives of the legionnaires difficult at various points. The Legion did not arrive for service until after General [Allenby's \(1861-1936\)](#) conquest of Jerusalem. The 38th and 39th battalions, however, were in service beginning in July 1918 and saw action at the battle of Megiddo (Armageddon) in September. The Legion's men were also among the first units to cross into Transjordan that month. They proved useful in the final battles and then in guarding [POWs](#). In 1919, the [British government](#) began to [decommission](#) the Legion. Jabotinsky struggled for the Legion's survival, claiming that the absence

of a Jewish armed forces would lead to violence against Jews.

Jabotinsky's Career after World War I

With the demobilization of the Legion, Jabotinsky decided to stay in Palestine, where he took on a role of a political activist and early harbinger of organized Jewish self-defense forces, which inspired the creation of the Haganah, the Jewish military organization. In April 1920, when the Jewish quarter in Jerusalem was attacked by local Arabs, Jabotinsky organized Jewish self-defense units, after which he was arrested by the British and interned in Acre Prison, accused of illegally training and arming Jews and using British military forces – former members of the Legion – without orders. While serving his time at Acre he changed his Russian first name Vladimir to the Hebrew Ze'ev. He was released after three months thanks to international pressure.

[Chaim Weizmann \(1874-1952\)](#) enlisted him, now a famous figure, for service in the Zionist Executive (March 1921). Jabotinsky traveled to North America and gave lectures, but felt increasingly uncomfortable with Weizmann's style of leadership and moderate stance. After [Winston Churchill's \(1874-1965\)](#) White Paper of 1922 was issued, which separated Palestine from Transjordan, his discomfort increased. This led to his resignation from the Executive in 1923, after which he moved to Berlin and from there, in 1924, to Paris. In Europe he began to organize discontents, émigrés from Russia, anti-Socialists, and religious Zionists. In 1925 he established an independent political party within World Zionism, known as Zionist Revisionism, in order to provide an alternative to both Labor Zionism and Weizmann's "anglophile" approach. By the early 1930s, Jabotinsky and his Revisionists became associated with the view that Jews needed to take up arms and fight. His article from 1923, "The Iron Wall," argued that the success of the Jewish colony in Palestine depended on British help in defeating the Arabs militarily and denying them the chance for armed resistance. The Revisionists were involved in creating and developing a number of popular institutions that emerged from Jabotinsky's movement, such as Betar (the youth organization), the Irgun (an anti-British paramilitary organization), and Aliyah Bet (an organization devoted to illegal immigration to Palestine). Some of these bodies, such as Betar, were more popular than the Revisionists. Because Jabotinsky was unable to win elections in the World Zionist movement, in 1935, he created his own political body, the New Zionist Organization, to compete with the World Zionist Organization. Jabotinsky spent his last years giving lectures about the Nazi threat and touting his ideas of Jewish mass emigration to Palestine and voluntarily evacuation from Europe under the pressures of antisemitism. Jabotinsky died in 1940 in Hunter, New York where he was inspecting a Betar camp.

Conclusion and Assessment

Known for his personal charisma, sharp pen, and mesmerizing rhetoric, Jabotinsky became a divisive figure during his lifetime, and more so after his death. While his followers considered him a liberal nationalist continuing the noble nineteenth-century progressive tradition of [Mazzini \(1805-1972\)](#) and [Garibaldi \(1807-1882\)](#), his critics took him to be a militant integral nationalist, flirting with

[fascism](#) if not even embracing it, famously leading [David Ben-Gurion \(1886-1973\)](#), the labor Zionist and future first Prime Minister of Israel, to label him “Vladimir Hitler.” Literary and artistic achievements – including the novels *Samson* (1927) and *The Five* (1936) and a long list of translations into Russian and Hebrew – added to Jabotinsky’s fame and also provided him an ideological platform. He authored two autobiographies, one about the Jewish Legion in Russian, translated as *The Story of the Jewish Legion* (1927), and *Story of My Life*, written in Hebrew (1936).

World War I transformed Jabotinsky into a major international figure and shaped much of his unique brand of Zionism, predicated on an uncompromising commitment to the idea of establishing a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan River, coupled with notions of Jewish self-defense, military might, and “*hadar*,” a Hebrew term Jabotinsky turned into a symbol denoting pride, stiff upper lip, and will to act. Prior to the war, Jabotinsky had not made military preparedness his credo, yet after it he followed the path of many interwar authoritarian leaders, developing a rigid anti-Socialist ethos and a new self-fashioned public persona, captured in his iconic photographs dressed in British military uniform. The creation of the Jewish Legion, to which he referred as “the alpha and omega of Zionism,” was considered by him a crowning achievement, the incarnation of a new, assertive Jewish spirit.^[3] In his own life he had some resonance and popularity, often outside Palestine (mostly in [Poland](#), the [Baltic States](#), and the US), but his party never represented a majority. Arguably, the great success of his ideas has emerged long after his death in the electoral successes of Herut and, later, the Likud parties in Israel.

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Notes

1. ↑ English translation of Jabotinsky, Vladimir: Horoskop [Horoscope], in: Odesskie Novosti, 1 January 1912, Jabotinsky Archive, ט-2/1912-עב [English translator unknown].
2. ↑ Rogan, Eugene L.: The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, New York 2015, p. 143.
3. ↑ Quoted in Bloom, Cecil: Colonel Patterson, Soldier and Zionist, in: Jewish Historical Studies 31 (1988), pp. 231-48, on p. 235.

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Citation

Dubnov, Arie M., Horowitz, Brian: Jabotinsky, Vladimir , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-08-05.
DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11397](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11397).

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